

The name of Vader's game is taking titles

Throughout the wrestling world, there are about a dozen claims to the world heavy-weight title.

But late last year, Leon White became the first to hold world heavyweight titles on three continents simultaneously. And he did so under two names.



**GRUNT
AND
GRIN**

BY DAVE MELTZER
FOR THE NATIONAL

Who's Leon White? Fans in the United States, Mexico and Japan know him as Big Van Vader, a 6-foot-3, 360-pound masked man who comes to the ring with a gigantic headpiece that blows smoke. In Europe, he wrestles, sans mask and headgear, as Bull Power.

Last November, when Big Van Vader defeated El Canek in Mexico City to win the UWA world heavyweight title, it made three world titles for the man with two names. In August, Vader defeated Riki Choshu in Tokyo to win that country's version of the world title for the second time (he's the only American besides Hulk Hogan to hold the IWGP world title). Also last year in Graz, Austria, Bull Power captured the Catch Wrestling Association (European) version of the world title, beating 430-pound Big Otto.

White has since dropped the Japanese and European versions of the title to their previous owners, but remains the top contender and top foreign drawing card for each promotion.

And Big Van Vader has started making a name for himself in the National Wrestling Alliance.

White, 34, was a football star at the University of Colorado and was thought to be a first-round NFL draft choice in 1978. However, an ankle injury suffered while running wind sprints for scouts ruined his career. The Los Angeles Rams took a chance on him in the sixth round, but his ankle never recovered.

He started wrestling five years ago. He made a name for himself in Europe by beating Big Otto for that continent's title for the first time in 1987.

But his biggest break came at the end of the year. Antonio Inoki's New Japan office wanted to create the ultimate powerhouse villain. The idea was to have a huge masked man with the gimmicked headpiece to use the name Big Van Vader, a take-off of the Darth Vader character from "Star Wars."

Finalists were two inexperienced powerhouses, White and Jim Hellwig (who later became the World Wrestling Federation's champion, The Ultimate Warrior). Japanese fans favor the burly look probably because of sumo wrestling and White was chosen and became an immediate superstar.

His popularity attracted the NWA and WWF. Neither group until recently wanted a wrestler signed for so many dates overseas. The NWA closed a deal, and Vader's U.S. "debut" (White wrestled early in his career for the AWA) was July 7 at the Baltimore pay-per-view show. Since then, even the WWF, which has a policy of only pushing wrestlers who work exclusively for the promotion, has considered breaking that rule to get Vader.

"Grunt and Grin" appears every Tuesday.

Chad -
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